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Pandemic Lockdown in Kerala: Vishu and Thrissur Pooram Festivals

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This paper reflects on the impact of Covid 19 lockdown in India on religious festivals. Two Hindu religious festivals in the state of Kerala namely Vishu and Thrissur Pooram are addressed here. Both festivals are immensely popular and close to the heart of the Malayali Hindu and non-Hindu communities alike. Rather than focusing on the economic impact, the emphasis here is on the socio cultural and psychological impact that it has had on the community. The nature and spirit of these festivals differ from one another which has helped or worsened the impact for the festival lovers. Due to the Covid 19 lockdown measures, secondary data collection is reduced to data sources such as newspaper articles, magazines, media reports, reflections and author insights regarding the general ‘vibe’ of the community. The findings suggest that the Vishu festival, even after the strict measures in place, was successful in the eyes of the community and its spirit was not broken. However, in the case of Thrissur Pooram, there is massive disappointment amongst the community and possible alternatives such as a Virtual Pooram could shape the future of such festivals.

Key Words: Vishu, Thrissur Pooram, Kerala, festival

Introduction

On the 24th of March 2020, India went into a complete lockdown. This included a restriction on people from stepping out of their homes, a suspension of all transport services such as road, air and rail, plus educational institutions, industrial establishments, hospitality services and most importantly, religious institutions. Exceptions were provided only for transportation of essential goods, fire, police and emergency services and services such as food shops, banks and ATMs, petrol pumps, other essentials and their manufacturing. The Home Ministry also stated that anyone who failed to follow the restrictions could face up to a year in jail (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). Though this was a very effective move to curb the curve of Covid 19, it choked the economy, and severely affected the socio-cultural spirit of the nation which includes many festive gatherings and religious celebrations.

One of the biggest disappointments of the Covid 19 outbreak has been the cancellation of religious festivals. As scholars around the globe agree, festivals are a vital

part of human lives. The cancellations included some of the biggest festivals in the world such as the Hajj, but also included the cancellation of many festivals in the subcontinent of India which exist under the large and scattered spectrum of Hinduism.

Hindu festivals with their huge reliance on natural phenomena and astrological dates resemble the celebration of rain or harvest to an agrarian society (Sanford, 2004; Jagannathan, 2005). In the evolutionary process, Sanskritization and Brahmanization transformed many folk and tribal festivals into Hindu festivals (Xavier, 2009). The narratives of the time, or in the words of Foucault, the episteme, Hindu episteme in this case as explored by Taylor (2008), assists in this transformation when society accepts Hindu canonical literature as the source of authority and validation of truth. Festivals such as the Mandalam Kalam festival of Sabarimala, Attukal Pongala and Kumbh Mela are all examples of this. This Hindu episteme draws boundaries and it questions who is a Hindu and who can be part of and celebrate these festivals, thus creating a false impression of the events as exclusive rituals, as quoted by Llewellyn ‘Vedas are

the shibboleth' (1994:237). This was seen in practice when Kerala's harvest festival of Onam celebrated by all religious communities was intentionally 'branded' as 'Vamana Jayanthi', a Hindu festival, by BJP's president Shah which sparked a row (The Economic Times, 2016). This approach seeks to create a unified religious identity which in reality has been absent in Hinduism since its formation. Hindu religious festivals are not homological. Each state, each city or even each temple has its own unique rituals and narratives. Thus, the Hindu religious festivals in the south Indian state of Kerala exhibit dramatic differences and uniqueness when compared to Hindu religious festivals of other states.

Vishu

Vishu is one of the biggest Hindu festivals in Kerala but it is unfamiliar in other states. Vishu is celebrated on the first day of the Malayalam month of 'Medam'. Vishu is literally translated as 'Equal' in Sanskrit and corresponds to the spring equinox when day and night are of equal lengths (Kerala Government, 2020). However, the equinox falls on the 14th of April in the Malayalam calendar which is a solar calendar as opposed to the 21st of March in the Georgian calendar (Kerala Tourism, 2020). It must be highlighted that this is also the time of harvests across India, suggesting agrarian origins for this astronomically influenced event, which was later appropriated as a Hindu festival.

This is a festive day across India and is known by many names. Bohag Bihu is celebrated in Assam as the Assamese new year, Pahela Baishakh or Pohela Boishakh is celebrated as New Year's Day in Tripura, West Bengal and neighbouring Bangladesh (Gupta and Gupta, 2006). Pahela Baishakh which literally means the first day of the month of Vaishak or Baisakhi is a historically and religiously auspicious day for the Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab region. The first day of Vaishak month which falls on the 13th or 14th of April is the auspicious occasion chosen by Sikh Guru Govind Singh to form the Khalsa Panth or a pure community of the faithful who wore visible symbols of their faith and trained as warriors in the year 1699 (Cole and Sambhi, 1989). The day also coincides with the Vaisakha Sankranti, and is celebrated as the Solar new year by the Hindu population in the Punjab and neighbouring regions based on the Hindu

Vikram Samvat calendar (BBC, 2009). In Tamilnadu, the 13th or 14th of April falls in the first day of the Tamil month *Chithirai* which uses a lunisolar calendar (Melton, 2011).

The Vishu festival plays a huge role in Kerala. Colonial era documents show that the Vishu festival was celebrated as early as the year 1792. Kurup (1988) says that the Hindu upper class and landowners of that time levied festive dues on the occasions of Onam and Vishu from the lower castes or Ryots and this practice was stopped after the British East India company took control of the Malabar region, now forming the northern part of Kerala, after the signing of the Treaty of Seringapatam. This clearly shows that the festival is well over 228 years old. xxx

Vishu in many ways resembles the Christian celebration of Christmas. The day before Vishu is the day for shopping, for setting up the *Vishu Kanni*¹ (see Figure 1) and the celebratory luncheon. Kanni refers to the first sight of the day / year which Hindus have long held as an action of faith to judge the outcome of the day or year to be promising or disappointing. The Kanni includes a display of traditional Kerala lamps known as Nilavilakku, golden cucumber, coconut cut in half, coins or currency notes, fruits, sweets and an image of the Hindu god Vishnu. The rice, fruits and sweets must have historically represented an abundant harvest. The Hindu women set up the Kanni in the wee hours of the morning and the men and children are woken up by the women, covering their eyes to avoid them seeing anything other than the Kanni as the first thing in the morning. Fireworks are a big part of the celebration and the industry enjoys a humongous boom during this period. Continuous fireworks are set off on the eve of Vishu and the Vishu day from the wee hours in the morning after Kanni (Nishanth Et al, 2012). On the day of Vishu, everyone wears new clothes and eats the feast known as Sadya. This is followed by a visit to the family home where everyone gets together. Vishu is also one among the two New year's celebration of the state, Onam being the other.

Figure 1: Vishu Kanni with Nilavilakku, golden cucumber, coconut cut in half, coins or currency notes, fruits, grains and an image of the Hindu god Vishnu



Source: Author

Black Vishu

A strict lockdown meant a 'Black Vishu' where people could not move around freely for shopping or visits to family homes. Sales of items such as gold, alcohol, textiles and luxury cars in Kerala typically doubles or triples during Vishu period. This has been severely affected leading to a loss of business worth 3000 million in Rupees (Livemint, 2020). In terms of how the people were affected by the festivals, interviews of various Malayalis across Kerala and those stuck abroad multilaterally agree that it was a huge disappointment for them.

Anticipation and excitement involved in planning the festivities will be absent this year' says Amrutha in an Interview by the New Indian Express news (New Indian Express, 2020). Comments from interviews on Malayali writers conducted by The Hindu included 'this Vishu will pass as just another ordinary day in our lives' and 'Vishu in 2020 will be unlike any we have experienced in the last 100 years or so (The Hindu, 2020).

Figure 2: Child looking at the Kanni and praying to the gods



Source: Author

Some slight loosening of the lockdown measures was provided by the State government during the Vishu eve with religious and cultural sentiments in mind. However, this resulted in chaos in many areas. In many areas including Kozhikode city, people pooled onto the markets and shopping centres in clear violation of the lockdown. According to The Hindu A (2020) the Kozhikode city police registered cases against 128 people and seized 92 vehicles. Thiruvananthapuram Rural police arrested 302 people, registered 293 cases and confiscated 184 vehicles during this day.

However, this was not something that ended up hurting the emotions of the Hindu community of Kerala. People were aware of the pandemic and the need of the hour. As my mother commented 'in a way I am happy with this Vishu as my two sons are stuck at home, who normally are out of state, and hence we could spend some quality time together' and this reflects the opinion of many surrounding families as well.

Harish, a prominent Malayali writer, commented in the Hindu (2020), 'It would be nice if people remember that it is we who create all these festivals and traditions' Adding to this Anita (The Hindu C, 2020) says 'as any Malayali will tell you, we are the masters and mistresses of making do. And so it shall be'. The general heartbeat of the Malayali community has been pleasant with Vishu 2020 even with the hardships caused by Covid 19.

Thrissur Pooram

Thrissur is a district in Kerala and regarded as the cultural capital of the state (Devika *et al.*, 2016). The term Pooram stands for festival. Thrissur Pooram is undoubtedly, a towering giant among religious festivals in India, or Asia as a whole. It is also one of the most flamboyant ones in the country and is known as the 'Pooram of Poorams' or festival of festivals as Josna Raphael & Kasthurba explain it

A cultural highlight par excellence. The two-century old festival of spectacular procession of caparisoned elephants and enthralling percussion performances in a never-ending succession is an 36 hours marathon event of incredible beauty, a feast for the eye and the ear, unfolding between 6 am to 12 noon the other day. Different from the usual temple festival, Thrissur Pooram is participated and conducted by people across all barriers of religion and caste (2015:465).

Thrissur Pooram is celebrated in the Malayalam month Medam (April/May) when the moon rises with the Pooram star or Delta leonis which is a star in the zodiac constellation of Leo (Biswa *et al.*, 2008). It is also the time of summer rains in Kerala and could perhaps be historically and culturally associated with the celebration of an agrarian society. The heavy rainfall has also been a catalyst in the formation of Thrissur Pooram festival.

The festival is associated with the Vadakkunnathan Temple dedicated to lord Shiva. The festival had its origins in the year 1798 when the Maharaja of Cochin, Raja Raja Varma or Shakthan Thamburan unified 10 temples in the vicinity and developed a Pooram surrounding the Vadakkunnathan Temple which now sits at the dead centre of Thrissur City. These 10 temples were denied access to the Arattupuzha Pooram in the year 1798, a festival of stark similarity, as they arrived late due to heavy rainfall (Kerala Tourism, 2020).

The 36-hour highlight of this 7 day festival is the heart and heartbeat of the Thrissur people. Though actual numbers are unavailable, G Rajesh, Secretary of the Paramekkavu Devaswom, reports the number of attendees to be close to 1 million in the 2-month festival period including national and international visitors (The News Minute,

2020). A huge chunk of the entire population of Kerala and Malayalis across the globe watch the Pooram on live television. It cannot be over emphasised that the Pooram is the pride of the people of Thrissur.

The festival easily fits into the profile of a Hallmark event similar to the Oktoberfest, Rio carnival etc though it is a religious festival and one that has not received a well-deserved attention and discourse in the events literature. As Oklobdžija states

Hallmark events are so identified with the spirit and soul of a host community that they become synonymous with the name of the place and gain widespread recognition and awareness. Hallmark events are of special importance and attractiveness both for participants and visitors, they attract great attention of the public, contribute to the image of destination and maintain and revitalize the tradition. These events are identified with the very essence of these places and their citizens, and bring huge tourist revenue as well as a strong sense of local pride and international recognition (2015:86-87).

The major attraction of the final 36 hours of the festival are the 30 royally caparisoned elephants which are divided into groups of two and made to face each other, namely Western Group (Thiruvambady side) and Eastern Group (Paramekkavu side). The space between them is flooded by the festival attendees and the orchestra. On top of the elephants are the tamers who hold and exchange colourful handmade Parasols of vibrant colours as an act of challenging the rivals facing them. This tradition is called 'umbrella changing' ceremony or 'Kudamattam' and is accompanied by continuous percussions and heroic fireworks by pyrotechnic wizards (Financial Express, 2017, 2019).

The festival is also attended by Kerala's tallest elephant, Thechikkottukavu Ramachandran who is 54 years old. It is he who sets off the ceremony when he kicks opens the temple doors and parades the idol of the temple deity across the premises. This has also resulted in heavy criticisms against the Pooram and Hindu temples in Kerala from animal rights activists and is also termed as the epitome of cruelty by people such as Dr. Augustus Morris who delivered a talk on this topic in Litmus 2018

Figure 3: Elephants Carrying Tamers and Colourful Parasols.
The orchestra and crowd can be observed celebrating and staring at the elephants



Source, Kerala Tourism

rationalist festival. However, elephants are central to the festivals and due to the pressure of religious emotions of the people of Kerala, the cruelty continues.

Sans Pomp Pooram

Undoubtedly, the biggest disappointment due to Covid 19 was that of the cancellation of the Thrissur Pooram. The

Pooram 2020 which fell on the 3rd of May was cancelled for the first time since its origin which has left a deep scar among hardcore festival lovers and Thrissur population as a whole. Due to the lockdown measures, no gatherings of more than 5 people were allowed, which was also to be followed by religious institutions.

Figure 4: S Vadakkunnathan Temple and Magnificent fireworks on the background



Source, The New Indian Express, 2019

The Thrissur Pooram 2020 which was initially planned to be cancelled, was later, as agreed upon by the Govt of Kerala and Paramakkavu Devaswom, the temple authority, boiled down to only the necessary rituals. In a twist, the Paramakkavu Devaswom sought permission from the District Collector to use one elephant for parading, which was rejected as it violated the initial agreement (Mathrubhumi, 2020). This caused further disappointment to the tuskar lovers, but perhaps poetic justice for the elephants finally delivered by the pandemic.

‘The cancellation of the Pooram is a loss to all the Keralites across the world. The pooram was our pride’ said Musical maestro Peruvanam Kuttan Marar who leads the orchestra for the Pooram in an interview conducted by Business Line (2020). It is needless to say that the pride of the Thrissur people has been shattered. Interviews conducted by all major news channels give strong empirical evidence to this. The large economic impact it has had on the vendors, hospitality industry and craftsmen are also huge as this is a hallmark event with an attendance of almost a million people. Almost 300 makeshift stalls are set up around the festival area ever year (The News Minute, 2020).

Disheartened pooram lovers and elephant fans celebrated the Pooram on social media platforms through sharing experiences, photos and notes of previously held Poorams (Business Line, 2020). Local news channels held discussions with many prominent personalities belonging to Thrissur, where they expressed their disappointment. This included people belonging to the Christian and Muslim communities.

Interestingly, a local news channel, for perhaps the first time in the country, presented a virtual Pooram for the viewers on the 2nd of May involving the presence of the great Thechikkottukavu Ramachandran and the Orchestra of Musical maestro Peruvanam Kuttan Marar as seen in Fig. 3. This was well received by the Malayali community across the world (Twenty Four News, 2020). This could perhaps stand as the early beginnings of virtual religious tours and festivals in the country.

Figure 5: The orchestra and Thechikkottukavu Ramachandran in the news studio using vfx)



Source- Twenty Four News, 2020

Conclusion

The pandemic has had a severe effect on the religious tourism and festivals sector. Along with the humongous loss it has brought down on the economy associated with this sector, the socio-cultural impact it has had on the pilgrims, visitors and tourists are unaccountably large. The paper presented the case of two cultural/religious festivals belonging to the state of Kerala in south India and how the harsh lockdown measures, in the light of a deadly pandemic, affected them.

The Vishu which is one of the largest cultural/religious festivals of the Malayali Hindu community was the first to be affected by the pandemic. However, the nature of the festival, which does not occupy a physical space, helped the community in overcoming many of the obstacles. The spirit of Vishu which in many cases resembles Christmas was kept intact. The major reason being the mass homecoming of people forced by the fear of Covid 19, which worked favourably for many who had travelled in advance. However, a large portion of the Malayali community were stuck in many parts of the world especially in the Middle East due to the freezing of air travel. This disappointment was bypassed by an improvised Vishu Kanni and Sadya at homes. It did not turn out to be a Black Vishu after all.

The case of Thrissur Pooram was however unpleasant and left a deep scar amongst the people of Thrissur. The news called it a 'Sans Pomp Pooram'. The Pomp surrounding the massive crowd, stalls, fireworks, orchestra and especially the elephants and the Umbrella exchange ceremony became a drawback due to the physicality of it. The spirit of the Pooram, unlike in the case of Vishu, is the folksy, playful, competitive, adventurous environment filled with festive lights and sounds which could not be bypassed in any metaphysical idea. However, a virtual Pooram, attempted for the first time in the country, received massive welcoming and could possibly turn into a custom of its own since a huge Malayali population enjoys live broadcast of the Pooram.

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